



State of Tennessee  
Department of State  
**Tennessee State Library and Archives**  
403 Seventh Avenue North  
Nashville, Tennessee 37243-0312

**LEA, JOHN OVERTON**  
**(1846-1912)**  
**FAMILY PAPERS, ADDITION**  
**1803-1907**

*Processed by:*

Roger A. Merritt

Accession Number: 1990.164  
Date Completed: May 10, 1990  
Location: VIII-L-6  
Microfilm Accession Number: 1137

**MICROFILMED**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The John Overton Lea Family Papers (1803-1907) are centered around John O. Lea (1846-1912), and family members, including John M. Lea (1818-1903), Ella (Cocke) Lea (1846-1935), and others. The papers of Overton Lea, descendant of early Tennessee families, Nashville lawyer, champion cattle breeder, and large property holder in Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee, were donated by Dr. Cromwell Tidwell of Nashville, Tennessee.

The materials in this finding aid measure 1.68 cubic feet. Single photocopies of unpublished writings in the John Overton Lea Papers may be made for purposes of scholarly research.

## SCOPE AND CONTENT

The John Overton Lea Family Papers, consisting of four boxes and approximately 570 items, span the period 1803-1909. The collection is composed of accounts (bills and receipts); applications (registers to the American Sussex Association); certificates; correspondence; financial documents; land records; legal documents; school records; and writings. These papers are an addition to the John Overton Lea Papers, 1867-1911, accession number 1223. A similar collection to this addition is the Robert Brinkley Lea Papers, 1849-1900, accession number 90-113.

Many items in the collection closely parallel those in the larger collection highlighting the years between Overton's college education and his death in 1912. The larger collection mainly pertains to the Lea family's business matters, whereas the addition mainly consists of family matters and travel from 1873-1907.

All of family life revolved around "Lealand" the prominent 1100-acre estate located near Traveller's Rest, where the Overtons and the Leas became close relatives and partners. In 1886 Lealand burned, but was built back on the same foundation by 1890. Several bills and receipts for new furnishings and repairs to the house are contained along with cancelled checks. There is very little mentioned in correspondence about the rebuilding of Lealand except for minor repairs, employment of servants, and the laying out of a tennis court in 1902 (Overton Jr. to Mother).

Land records include deeds and indentures dating from 1803, for John Overton and John M. Lea. These deeds are some of the oldest items in the collection and represent the formation of Lealand and several businesses in downtown Nashville.

Applications to the American Sussex Association Register and certificates of stock in various companies, such as the railway, theatre, and Tennessee Hackney Stud indicate that Overton had a broad base of business interests. There are no papers pertaining to Overton's earlier career practicing law which spanned the years 1870-1880.

There are 408 letters between members of the Lea family from the years 1873-1907. A number are from Judge John M. Lea (1818-1902), his son Overton Lea (1846-1912), and Overton's wife, Ella (Cocke) Lea (1846-1935). The children of Overton were Laura (1873- ), the oldest, who spent several years in school in Dresden, Germany, and received many letters; Luke (1879-1945), later a U. S. Senator and founder of the *Nashville Tennessean*, and his brother Overton Jr. (1877-1903), both of whom attended Sewanee College and Columbia University Law School in New York; and Elizabeth (1884-1967), the youngest, who was in school in New York at a girls finishing school, and received many letters from her father. The Lea family spent a part of almost every year either in England, Germany, the Isle of Jersey, Maine's Kennebunkport, Northeast Harbor, or Monteagle, Tennessee. Much correspondence is from members of the family who were traveling single, in pairs, or in groups. The majority of correspondence is from Overton Lea.

From these letters one can piece together the everyday occurrences and lifestyle of a wealthy Southern family during those years.

## CONTAINER LIST

### **Box 1**

1. Accounts – Bills, notes & receipts – Lealand, 1888-1890
2. Accounts – Bills, notes & receipts – Lealand, 1890-1891
3. Accounts – Bills, notes & receipts – Lealand, 1890-1892
4. Applications – American Sussex Association, 1886-1904
5. Certificates – Stock, 1891-1908
6. Financial Documents – Cancelled checks – Overton Lea, 1890-1891
7. Land Records – Deeds – John Overton to John M. Lea, 1847
8. Land Records – Deeds – John M. Lea to Mayor & Alderman, 1864
9. Land Records – Indentures – Thomas Love to John M. Lea, 1803
10. Land Records – Indentures – John Boyd to John Overton, 1806
11. Land records – Indentures – Roger Sappington to John Overton, 1812
12. Legal Documents – Agreements – Overton Lea, J. O. Leake, Bessie Leake, Luke Lea, 1909
13. Legal Documents – Wills – John M. Lea & Elizabeth (Overton) Lea, 1890, 1902
14. School Records – Notes on Government, ca. 1869
15. Writings – “Subject Home,” ca. 1810

### **Box 2 Correspondence**

1. Gails – Keith
2. Lea, Miss Elizabeth
3. Lea, Ella (Cocke)
4. Lea, John M.
5. Lea, Laura
6. Lea, Luke
7. Lea, Overton to Dickenson, J. M.
8. Lea, Overton to Lea, Elizabeth (Overton)
9. Lea, Overton to Lea, Miss Elizabeth
10. Lea, Overton to Lea, Miss Elizabeth
11. Lea, Overton to Lea, Ella (Cocke)
12. Lea, Overton to Lea, Ella (Cocke)

### **Box 3 Correspondence**

1. Lea, Overton to Lea, Ella (Cocke)
2. Lea, Overton to Lea, Ella (Cocke)
3. Lea, Overton to Lea, Ella (Cocke)
4. Lea, Overton to Lea, Ella (Cocke)
5. Lea, Overton to Lea, Ella (Cocke)
6. Lea, Overton to Lea, Ella (Cocke)

**Box 4 Correspondence**

1. Lea, Overton to Lea, Ella (Cocke)
2. Lea, Overton to Lea, John M.
3. Lea, Overton to Lea, Laura
4. Lea, Overton to Lea, Luke.
5. Lea, Overton to Lea, Overton Jr.
6. Lea, Overton to Lea, Rebecca
7. Lea, Overton Jr.
8. Lea, Overton Jr.
9. Lea, Overton Jr.
10. Pinkey – Wiggins
11. Shelby, John to Overton, John, 1805
12. Telegrams

## NAME INDEX

This is a name index of correspondence in the John Overton Lea Family Papers, together with the dates of the letters and information regarding their contents. The figures in parentheses denote the number of letters, if more than one. The last numbers refer to the box and folder in which the material is to be found.

- Gails, H. F. to Overton Lea, 1907, re: spoke to a Jamestown audience for Mrs. Lea, 2-1
- Keith, C. L. to Overton Lea Jr., 1892, re: letter to Lea on voyage about farm animals and the Fat Stock Show, 2-1
- Lea, Miss Elizabeth (5) to (Mother) Ella Lea, 1889-1907, re: family news; life at Miss Huger's school in New York, 2-2
- (3) to (Grandfather) John M. Lea, 1884-1899, re: from Germany tour; went to a circus; from Scotland; mentions funeral of Mary Trousdale, 2-2
- to (Father) Overton Lea, 1902, re: family matters; Overton is in Washington, D. C., 2-2
- Lea, Ella (Cocke) (2) to Mrs. Elizabeth (Overton) Lea, 1873, re: spent several months in Brooklyn, California; reports about health and diet; activities such as visiting San Francisco, 2-3
- (5) to John M. Lea, 1873-1894, re; from Denver, Colorado; trip from out West; yellow fever in Memphis; from Kennebunkport, Maine, family news and health; enjoyed the carnival; grieves being separated from daughter Laura; involved in the "Neighbor's Club"; from Germany; sorrow for John M. Lea Jr., 2-3
- to Luke Lea, 1896, re: from Jersey; awaiting the arrival of Luke and husband; do not fall in love with anyone at Sewanee; guided tour, 2-3
- Lea, John M. to Laura Lea, 1990, re: family matters, 2-4
- (20) to (Sister) Margaret Henegar, 1887-1902, re: mostly family news to his sister in Charleston, Tennessee, 2-4
- to Overton Lea, 1900, re; family news to his, 2-4
- to Overton Lea Jr., 1896, re: family news to Jersey, 2-4
- Lea, (Robertson), Laura (15) to (Mother) Mrs. Ella Lea, 1890-1901, re: family news; Grandmother's illness; enjoyed description of Elizabeth's debut in New York; letters to Mother in New York and Maine; (1901, married Clendening Robertson and moved to Lookout Mountain, Chattanooga); married life, 2-5
- (3) to (Grandfather) John M. Lea, 1893-1896, re: from Kennebunkport; summer activities; plans to study in Dresden; from Salzburg, Austria; travels and impressions; sorrow for John M. and Uncle Robert Lea; from Jersey; mentions Bishop Quintard; summer accommodations ; Overton Jr. his studies—being tutored by Mr. Robertson, 2-5
- to Overton Lea, 1901, re; from Lookout Mountain, 2-5

Lea, Luke (3) to (Mother) Mrs. Ella Lea, 1902-1905, re: from New York; life at Columbia Law School; family business about property in Nashville and Memphis, 2-6

----- (6) to (Grandfather) John M. Lea, 1893-1896, re: summer at Kennebunkport; decorated a boat; from Germany; sorrow for cousin John M.; unbearable heat in Dresden; studies; traveling in carriages to see Ludwig's castles; mountain climbing; writes, "Though we have not learned much by books, we have I think, learned a good deal by experience and scenery"; from Sewanee; school enrollment; from steamer departing Bremen; Luke and father's trip to Dresden; conditions on steamer—full of Germans and Jews; nearing Southampton; made friends with young ladies from Ohio; church services on steamer; Luke is glad he came on trip; promises to look at the stars, 2-6

----- to (Father) Overton Lea, 1901, re: family matters; discusses John M. Lea Jr.'s will, 2-6

----- (2) to Overton Lea Jr., 1892, re; news from home; brother is in Germany; farm animals for sale at the market; gives names to animals, 2-6

Lea, Overton to Honorable J. M. Dickenson, 1904, re: copy to reply to sympathy letter after death of Overton Jr.; comments about his son, 2-7

----- (3) to (Mother) Mrs. Elizabeth Lea, 1873, re: from Brooklyn, California; mentions friends from Nashville; compares people in California to people in the South; health conditions; living in California; from Denver, Colorado; traveling home to Nashville, 2-8

----- (21) to (daughter) Miss Elizabeth Lea, 1896-1901, re: family news to daughter on the Isle of Jersey; mentions her farm animals; Luke passed all his examinations and will join you at Chalet Pontiac; enrollment of daughter in school at New York; mentions Sewanee football team that Luke is coach of; the Lovells are going abroad; mentions football season schedule and results; went to Historical Society meeting on "Early History of Nashville" and Mr. Thurston presented a painting of John M. Lea; discusses Sewanee's superiority over Vanderbilt in football; Ella joins the Philharmonic Society; Ella entertains the First Tennessee Volunteers for dinner; more about Sewanee's undefeated football season; fatherly advice about not becoming a "society girl"; speculates about the future when daughter is finished with school, 2-9 & 10

----- (196) to (Wife) Mrs. Ella (Cocke) Lea, 1889-1907, re: several from Montecagle about family & health matters; advice about hiring servants; Bon voyage to Ella and Laura going to Germany; Laura's calf, "Lasso," and the cattle show; take precautions about sickness; the McIntoshs are in Dresden; mentions that Robert and John M. have arrived for visit; mentions Mrs. Wiggins; several letters to Ella at Isle of Jersey; she is taking the children; Mr. Robertson is tutoring the children and is attracted to Laura; speculates about bringing father to Jersey; Ella's membership in Colonial Dames Society; advises Ella and the children not to do their own chores, but to hire servants; father is too ill to travel; mentions family physician, Dr. Dake, several times; meeting with Mr. De Bruyn

(Dutch) who was in charge of the Java Plantation at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago; several letters to Ella at Monteagle; the boys will be gentlemen even though they are a little self-willed at times; wedding plans of Isabel; Nashville's preparation for the Centennial Exposition; (1900) Mr. Berry wants to consult about law suit concerning Robert Lea's will; opposition to Rebecca Lea's suit; several letters mention the construction of Overton Park in Memphis; early limited use of telephones; makes plans for Ella to spend summer in Maine with children while he and father stay in cottage at Monteagle; mentions that Overton Jr. is attending summer school in Ann Arbor, Michigan; several letters mention Dr. Dake and Dr. Eve's treating father's arm; Rachael Overton's elopement with a Baptist minister's son in Gallatin; cautions about who Elizabeth associates with, remember what happened to Rachael Overton; mentions a newspaper article about Rebecca Lea, which tells about her trip to Europe; Overton elaborates on the case between Bessie and Rebecca; father's fractured arm is healing well for a man his age; the obituary of Rev. Greenough of Sewanee; speculation about running for public office; compliments Ella's ability to manage the finances in Maine; temperatures over 100 degrees in Monteagle; rumor that Rebecca Lea is going abroad to be treated for cancer; Senator Turley and the Park Commission; Overton Jr. joins the others at Northeast Harbor; Laura is pregnant with second child; Overton searches for suitable apartment in New York for sons near Columbia; Overton Jr. is back at Columbia after an unpleasant time at University of New York; mentions a fighting incident at school; Imagene's wedding; several letters to Ella in Washington, D. C.; (1902) from London; travel in England; from New York; Overton Jr. breaks off engagement with Miss Emma; the boys passed the Bar examination; (very little mention about John M. Lea's death, or Overton Jr.'s death); business trips to Memphis and pleasure trips to Lookout Mountains; some thoughts about Overton Jr. on the anniversary of his death; (1907) mentions that Mr. Leake gave him several old letters including one from General Jackson to Grandfather (John Overton?), 2-8 through 12; 3-1 through 6; 4-1

----- (32) to (Father) John M. Lea, 1869-1902, re: from University of Virginia; mentions repayment of loans from two friends—Will R. Moore and Thomas Eakin; from Brooklyn, California; health, treatments by Doctors Farnsworth and Sullivan; cutting down on tobacco; (1893) several letters from Kennebunkport; family and business matters; loan from American National Bank; financial situation; discusses the value of silver and gold standards, real estate; several from Dresden, Germany; news and health; planning a trip to the country; daily routine; describes German society; cholera reports; comparing government in Germany to America; an incident of mistaken identity—Overton was mistaken by police as being the brother of Mrs. McIntosh in the U. S. Consuls Office on a business errand (her brother committed forgery three years before); Overton was upset about the incident and issued a statement at the U. S. Embassy in Berlin; several letters from Bavaria and Austria; travel descriptions; received a letter



from Robert Lea in London, where John M. was deathly ill with tuberculosis; mentions reading several newspapers and discusses politics; travel through Innsbruck and Salzburg over the Roman Appia Claudia Road; requests that father burns his letters; meeting with the Howards; attending the Bayreath Music Festival; mentions that father should pay certain bills for him while away, i.e. Life Insurance Policy, telephone bill; news from Robert that John M. is seriously ill; Overton plans to take family to England as soon as possible, or go alone; from the Rhine River; going to London to comfort Robert and Rebecca; news about legislation of tariff bill; from London; Robert has taken John M. on to Davos, Switzerland; information from John M.'s nurse and doctor; (1899) from North Wales; travel with Ella and Elizabeth around British Isles; met with the Nichol's family in Chester; from Glasgow, touring Scotland's Highlands; visiting Edinburgh; a long discourse about Rebecca Lea and her dealings with the family and John M.'s will; advises father to close all business matters with her at once; from London; enroute to Paris, will let Ella decide all the plans; a discourse on British Railways; from Paris; still letting Ella make the decisions; "Paris grows on you very fast"; comments on municipal government; much commentary on sight-seeing and Parisian Life; met the Farnelly family, who used to live on Vine Street in Nashville; (1902) from England; comments about the English, 4-2

----- (24) to (daughter) Laura Lea (Robertson), 1890-1904, re: several from Monteagle to Kennebunkport ( summer 1890); witnessed the opening ceremonies of the Normal School; advises daughter to be "prudent" around young men; a student at Sewanee drowned in Elk River on boat accident; advises Laura and Isabel not to keep too much company with young men; (1893) Laura is in Dresden; requests that she write more detailed letters to her Mother and statements pertaining to her expenses; Chancellor Paine, of the Normal College, will find a tutor for the boys; congratulations for receiving a music award; employment of a tutor named Mr. Robertson (who married Laura in 1901); Auntie and Isabel move to Chicago; encourages Laura to go to more cultural activities; family life back at Lealand; admonishes her to work less on music lessons and write more letters; keep better records of expenses; preparing for voyage to visit daughter in Dresden; (1895) from Nashville; Fat Stock Cattle Show in Chicago; won prizes for Sussex Cattle; (1896) Laura is on the Isle of Jersey; Luke and Overton Jr. need more study; mentions Mr. Robertson, also vacationing; mentions Isabel's plans to be married at Lealand; (1904) from Washington D. C.; mother's Colonial Dames activities, 4-3

----- (9) to (son) Luke Lea, 1899-1904, re: from Boston; will meet Auntie in New York and travel to British Isles by steamer with Ella and Elizabeth; (1901) received grades from Columbia for Luke and Overton Jr.; advises Luke not to leave small debts; summer activities in Northeast Harbor; (1904) from Washington D. C., 4-4

- (6) to (son) Overton Lea Jr., 1892-1896, re: family and health matters on son's trip to Dresden; mentions Mr. Keith and Uncle Robert Lea; fatherly advice; news from the cattle farm; mentions cousin John M.; (1896) several to Isle of Jersey; "Hilda" had six puppies of doubtful paternity; mentions politics and the National Democratic Convention; advises son about academics, but says the most important thing is health; mentions forthcoming trip to Jersey, 4-5
- to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1893, re: from Kennebunkport; John M.'s birthday; remarks about John M.'s character and his grades; family news, 4-6
- Lea, Overton Jr. (3) to (sister) Miss Elizabeth Lea, 1900, re: from Sewanee to New York; college life; mentions friend, David Shepherd; a "snuff" incident; mentions Miss Margaret Elliott; discusses sister's trip home, 4-7
- (35) to (Mother) Mrs. Ella Lea, 1899-1902, re: from Monteagle; bird hunting with father; (1900) from Savannah, Georgia; visiting Miss Emma; at sea to London; traveling with Luke; from New York; living in Harlem boarding house with Luke; Presidential Election, and long line at voting booth; college activities with friends and outings with Elizabeth; attending theatre and musicals; (1901) several from Harlem; mentions H. E. Memminger; banquet for the Alpha Tau Omega Alumni Association; Luke has smallpox; social function by Aristocratic landlady; plans to take a course at University of Michigan; mentions death of President William McKinley, who was assassinated; attending New York University; summoned to the Harlem Police Court—dispute over right to vote and place of residency; Luke was elected President of his class; joined YMCA; returning to Columbia University; passing reference to fighting incident; (1902) the ceremony for new Columbia University President—many prominent people invited; mentions a tennis court at Lealand; playing handball at gym; a long imaginative narration about the West Indies, 4-7, 8, 9
- (8) to (Grandfather) John M. Lea, 1896-1902), re: family news; studies at Sewanee; from Isle of Jersey; mentions Bishop Quintard; problems with servants at Pontac, Jersey; parade for William Jennings Bryan in Presidential campaign; mentions a decision about John M.'s will is forthcoming; an account of the installation of Nicholas Murray Butler as President of Columbia University—attended by President Teddy Roosevelt, Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller; mentions death of Watkins Overton—cause of death suicide or murder?, 4-7, 8, 9
- (3) to (sister) Laura Lea (Robertson), 1889-1893, re: from Monteagle; family news; the chicken trade; mentions 13<sup>th</sup> birthday; mentions Auntie and Isabel; aboard steamer "Aller" on trip to Dresden; stopping at Hanover, 4-7
- to Luke Lea, 1901, re: from Cincinnati; train ride to Nashville with Elizabeth, 4-8
- (5) to (Father) Overton Lea, 1901-1903, re: from New York; a long letter about a fighting incident at New York University with a Jewish student; transfers back to Columbia; visited by Col. Claiborne; visited by the Lovells; attending the theatre, 4-8, 9

Pinkey, S. S. to Overton Lea, Jr., 1896, re: school friend at Sewanee, 4-11  
Shelby, John to John Overton, 1805, re: concerns a suit Shelby had employed Overton  
to handle regarding Evan Shelby and Ashurt's in a Preemption case, 4-10  
Wells, Holly Wilberforch to Mr. & Mrs. Overton Lea, 1900, re: general news;  
mentions a Baptist revival, 4-11  
Wiggins, Clara to Mrs. Ella Lea, 1905, re: from Winchester, Tennessee; general news,  
4-11